How Halo’s 2001 Release Changed the Gaming World

Community NerdyBirdy Dec 14, 2021

It’s rare that a new release of music, literature or cinema truly changes or defines a genre. Change after all, is difficult to force. Most of a year’s new editions are either incremental additions to a long-standing tradition, or simply derivative copies of previous pieces. But inevitably, a truly groundbreaking release unleashes a new generation of creativity.

In 1963, *the Beatles* released their debut album *Please Please Me* and helped usher in a new age of popular music in which genres such as rock, pop, classical and folk could be mixed, melded, and blended. Similarly, the release of movies such as *Star Wars* in 1977 and *Spiderman* in 2002 paved the way for exciting new portrayals of science fiction and comic books through cinema.

A comparable moment arrived in 2001 with the release of Xbox’s *Halo: Combat Evolved*. While it might sound melodramatic to state that Halo shaped the future of its genre, it’s indisputable when Halo’s legacy is fully considered.

Life Before Halo

Before November 2001, the first-person shooter (FPS) game was a widely popular genre carried over from its days in amusement parks and mall arcades. While the gameplay of FPS games steadily improved over the 90’s, the games themselves continued to rely on a certain level of absurdity to engage with users. For instance, if you weren’t hunting dinosaurs with compound bows in *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter*, you were chopping down demons with a double-sided chainsaw in *Doom 64*.

Gimmicks and quirks were a common feature of FPS multiplayers too. The most popular series before Halo was Nintendo's *GoldenEye*. *GoldenEye*'s multiplayer allowed users to select from a range of characters, some of which had unique physical features that allowed for easier gameplay. *GoldenEye* also contained over twenty different weapons ranging from FPS standards, to the one-hit Golden Gun or Moonraker Laser. In short, the FPS appeared to have a certain ludicrousness baked into the genre itself.

All that would change with the release of *Halo: Combat Evolved*.

Professionalizing the First-Person Shooter

Halo was released in November 2001 to immediate and universal critical acclaim. The gameplay, which favored consistency and standardization over cheap gimmicks, was widely praised. As was the emotionally poignant storyline and campaign features.

However, there was an initial hesitancy regarding its multiplayer. Critics wondered if a highly professionalized and standardized gameplay would appeal to younger audiences searching for a game to play with their friends. There was no lineup of goofy characters, or a wide arsenal of made-for-movies weapons. Multiplayer maps favored strategy and careful decision making over the random obstacles and hazards of earlier FPS games.

Image: Bungie Inc.

Fortunately, earlier fears turned out to be completely unfounded. While Halo was not an immediate best-seller, it's long tail sales rate and high attach rate for the Xbox made it an unprecedented success for Xbox. The game sold more than four million copies within its first five years and remains one of the best-selling video games of all-time.

Leading the Way for a New Era of First-Person Shooters

Halo became more than just a household name among teenagers and college kids. It also helped pave the way for a new generation of FPS games. It's impossible not to see Halo's richly layered storyline or emphasis on strategy in the explosion of FPS role-playing games that emerged in the 2000's and 2010's.

Genre defining games such as *Red Dead Redemption* in 2010*, BioShock* in 2007, or 2019's *The Outer World*s all feature gameplay elements that first originated with Halo such as a two weapons limit, a regenerating shield, or massive levels with an open-world emphasis on terrain and natural features.

Image: Obsidian Entertainment

A final important but often overlooked contribution from Halo is that it allowed FPS games to shape the direction of console gaming. Previously, most FPS games lived on PC's, and were not seen as effective marketing tools for consoles. That would change with Halo's incredible success for Xbox.

Twenty Years Later

As we celebrate twenty years of Halo and enjoy last week’s most recent edition, we should also take the time to appreciate the full legacy of the Halo series. Halo did not just bring us seven excellent games but helped influence and create an entire family of FPS and FPS role playing games as well.